



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2022

# Xplor

THAT LOOK YOU GIVE  
WHEN THERE'S A  
**NEW BIRD**  
**IN TOWN**





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*Pull out this poster* and tape it to your wall to make your room look wild.

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Male elk, called bulls, can tip the scales at over 800 pounds. In the fall, bulls attract girlfriends by letting loose earsplitting squeals called bugles. To hear bugles and see elk, head to Peck Ranch Conservation Area near Winona.

 by David Stonner





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**We recycle.**

**You can, too! Share  
*Xplor* with friends.**

## ON THE COVER

Northern Cardinal

*by Noppadol Paothong*



# STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the  
**UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,**  
AND **UNBELIEVABLE**  
stuff that goes on in nature

Curled up under layers of leaves, most **WOOLLY BEARS** freeze solid during winter. Antifreeze-like fluids keep their bodies from being damaged. When the ground thaws in spring, so do the fuzzy, little caterpillars.



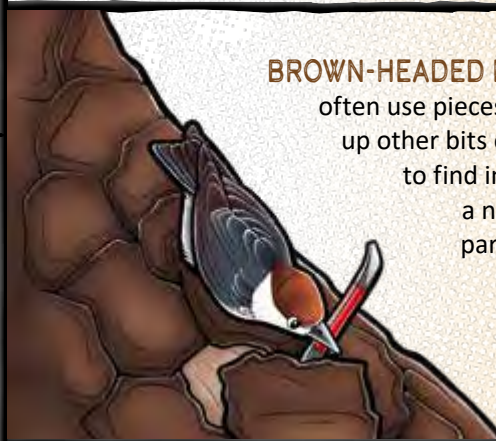
Boatloads of bats:

Ninety-five percent of the **GRAY BATS** in the whole wide world hibernate in just nine caves every winter. Several of those hibernation hangouts are located in — or rather, under — Missouri.



## BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCHES

often use pieces of bark to pry up other bits of bark, hoping to find insects to eat. If a nuthatch finds a particularly useful pry bark, it carries it from tree to tree.



In the fall, **SQUIRRELS** have just one thought in their furry heads: gathering enough nuts for winter.

Although the bushy-tailed hoarders can collect nearly 100 pounds of acorns, blue jays and other nut-munchers steal nearly a quarter of the stash.



Need a new leg? No problem. Lose your arm? No **claws** for alarm. That is, if you're a **CRAYFISH**. The armor-covered crustaceans have an amazing ability to regrow limbs that are damaged or lost to predators.



In a scary-movie display of flexibility, an **OWL** can turn its head 270 degrees — almost all the way around. This means the mouse-munching bird can look to the left by turning its head to the right!



Whoa, baby! A **TERMITE QUEEN** can lay up to 30,000 eggs per day. That's nearly 11 million eggs in a year. Queens can live 20 years or longer. So over a lifetime, a single queen can produce 220 million babies!





# WHAT IS IT?

**DON'T KNOW?** Jump to page 21 to find out.

- 1 My smile might fill you with dread.
- 2 And I can grow as long as a bed.
- 3 Armor covers my tail to my head.
- 4 I live in water that makes other fish dead.



## Ask an OPOSSUM

Hi! I'm Phi, *Xplor's* mail possum. I know a lot about nature. If you have a question, email me at [AskPhi@mdc.mo.gov](mailto:AskPhi@mdc.mo.gov).



**Q:** Why do coyotes howl at night?  
— From Lily, age 9

**A:** Because no one would hear them if they whispered! Coyotes also bark, yip, yelp, whimper, and growl. You usually hear them at night, but they sometimes let loose during the day. When one raises a ruckus, nearby coyotes often join in. Their racket can be heard more than 3 miles away! Although it sounds spooky, there's nothing to fear. Howling is how coyotes talk to each other. It's how they say, "I'm lonely," "Stay away," or "Let's find some rabbits to eat."



# HOW TO

## USE BINOCULARS

**B**inoculars are a great tool to get a close look at faraway critters. But focusing on a bird (or any other tiny creature) can be a challenge for first-timers. Follow these tips, though, and you'll be a binocular pro in no time.

### BINOCULAR ANATOMY





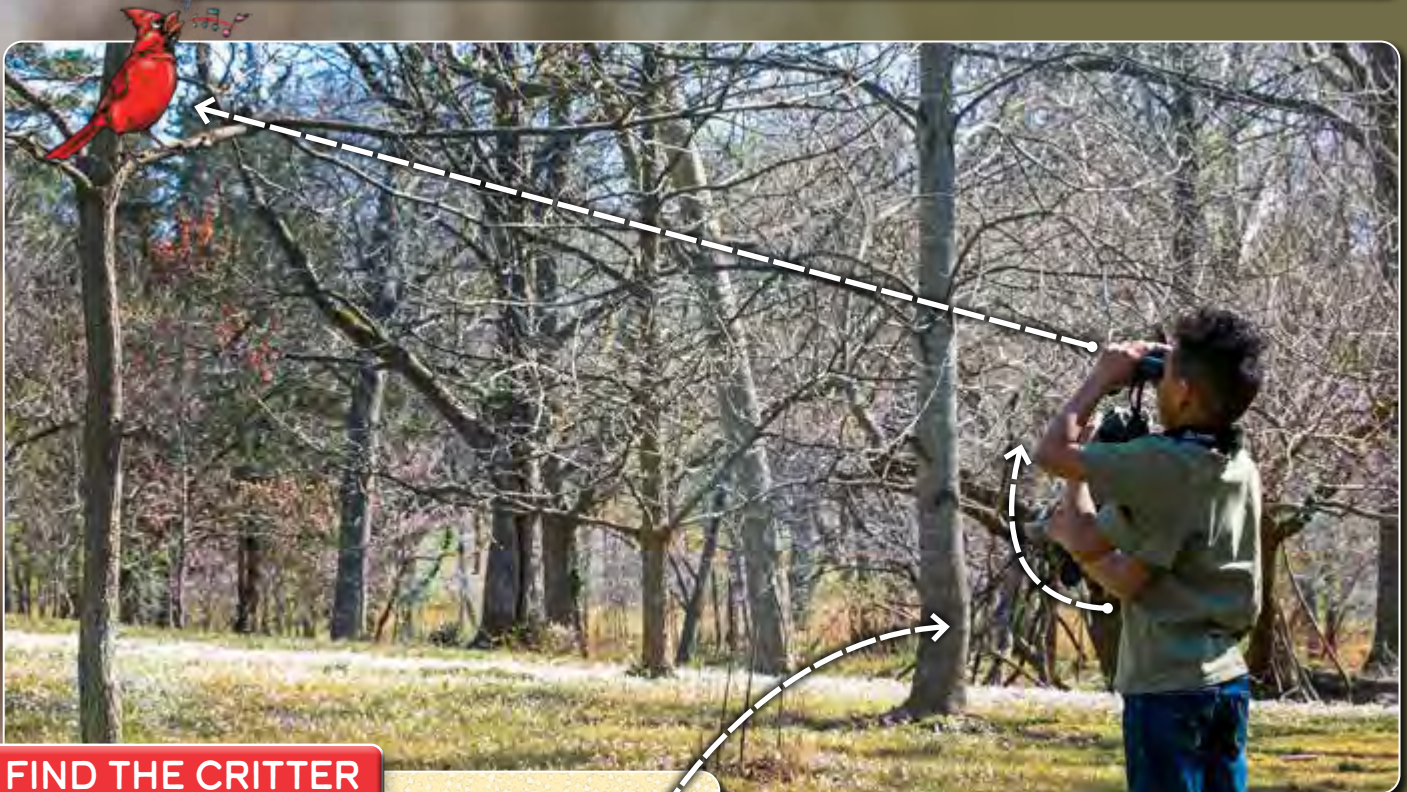
## ADJUST THE EYE CUPS

- First things first: Binoculars cost a lot. You don't want to drop them! Put the neck strap over your head so the binocs hang securely from your neck.
- Most binoculars have adjustable eye cups. They help hold your eyes at the right distance from the lens.
- Adjusting the eye cups is easy. If they're made of soft rubber, the rim of the eye cup folds up and down. If they're made of harder material, they twist in and out. If you wear glasses, the eye cups should be down. If you don't wear glasses, the eye cups should be up.

## ADJUST THE FIT

The sides of the binoculars (the barrels) swing up and down on a hinge. To get the binoculars to fit your face, gently pull the barrels as far apart as they'll go. Lift the binocs up to your eyes. You'll

probably see two separate images (one through each eye). Slowly squeeze the barrels together until you see only one image — a perfect circle. Now you're ready to find something to look at.



## FIND THE CRITTER

Let's say you spot a bird and want to look at it through your binoculars. The key is to keep your eyes on the bird and *not* on your binocs.

Find the bird with your bare eyes. Without taking them off your feathered friend, lift the binoculars up to your eyes. The bird should appear in the center of the image.

If you don't see it, lower the binoculars and try again.

**REMEMBER:** Don't look at the binocs, keep your eyes glued to that bird!

## FOCUS

Once you've found the bird in your binoculars, it will probably look fuzzy and out of focus. Don't worry, it's easy to fix. Simply turn the focus wheel one way or the other until the image becomes clear and sharp. With practice, you'll be able to find what you're looking for and focus the binoculars in one smooth motion.



# Head-Scratchers and Knee-Slappers

Need something fun to do on the long drive to grandma's house? Or a joke to tell to Uncle Mark? Xplor's here to help with some wild and wacky puzzles and jokes.



**WHAT'S A DUCK'S FAVORITE PASTA?**

*Quack-aroni and cheese.*



**HOW DO SNAKES STAY SO SKINNY?**

*They have lots of scales.*



**WHAT DO BOBCATS EAT FOR BREAKFAST?**

*Mice Krispies.*



M A R S H V E R M I L I O N F L Y C A T C H E R A  
F O R E S T R O B I N O N H F R E S H A I R F O X  
H O T M O N B B R O T H E R O B L U E J A Y B U G  
T R E E A S O U O U T S I D E O P L A N T R O C K  
W A T E R G T O R P R A I R I E D W O O D L A N D  
S I S T E R N A N R F I S H I N G E S U N R I S E  
S C I E N C E I B E O E X P L O R E D N A T U R E  
C O L O R F U L F O F W H I L L A N D O R I V E R  
M O M S T R E A M I I W I D A D W I N D R D U C K  
S W A M P M O U S E C A O N O A K T R E E I B A T  
R A T T L E S N A K E E I O G S P A R R O W O O F  
S U N S E T F L O W E R N A D O C A T F I S H L A  
B U M B L E B E E B E A R T I S W O U T D O O R E  
W I L D T U R K E Y D E E R F I T L F E A T H E R  
B L U E G I L L M E A D O W L R A O R A C C O O N  
F U R C O T T O N T A I L S I A I A R C O Y O T E  
I B R O W N B O O B Y D O G M O N G A K X P L O R  
V B U T T E R F L Y W R E N P H O T A B O B C A T  
O C O N S E R V A T I O N A K C O L D T S K U N K  
R H U N T I N G A N I M A L I N E S T S E F R O G  
Y F I S H I N G S P R I N G N S U M M E R B M D C  
G F A L L H O A R Y R E D P O L L C A V E S I O N  
U R I V O L I S H U M M I N G B I R D P O N D R I  
L W I N T E R C R E S T E D C A R A C A R A E L D  
L S A L A M A N D E R L A R G E M O U T H B A S S

Brown booby  
Burrowing owl  
Crested caracara  
Hoary redpoll

Hooded oriole  
Ivory gull  
Limpkin  
Magnificent frigatebird

Rivoli's hummingbird  
Vermilion flycatcher  
Wood stork

(TURN TO PAGE 9 FOR THE ANSWER KEY.)



# the Hungry game

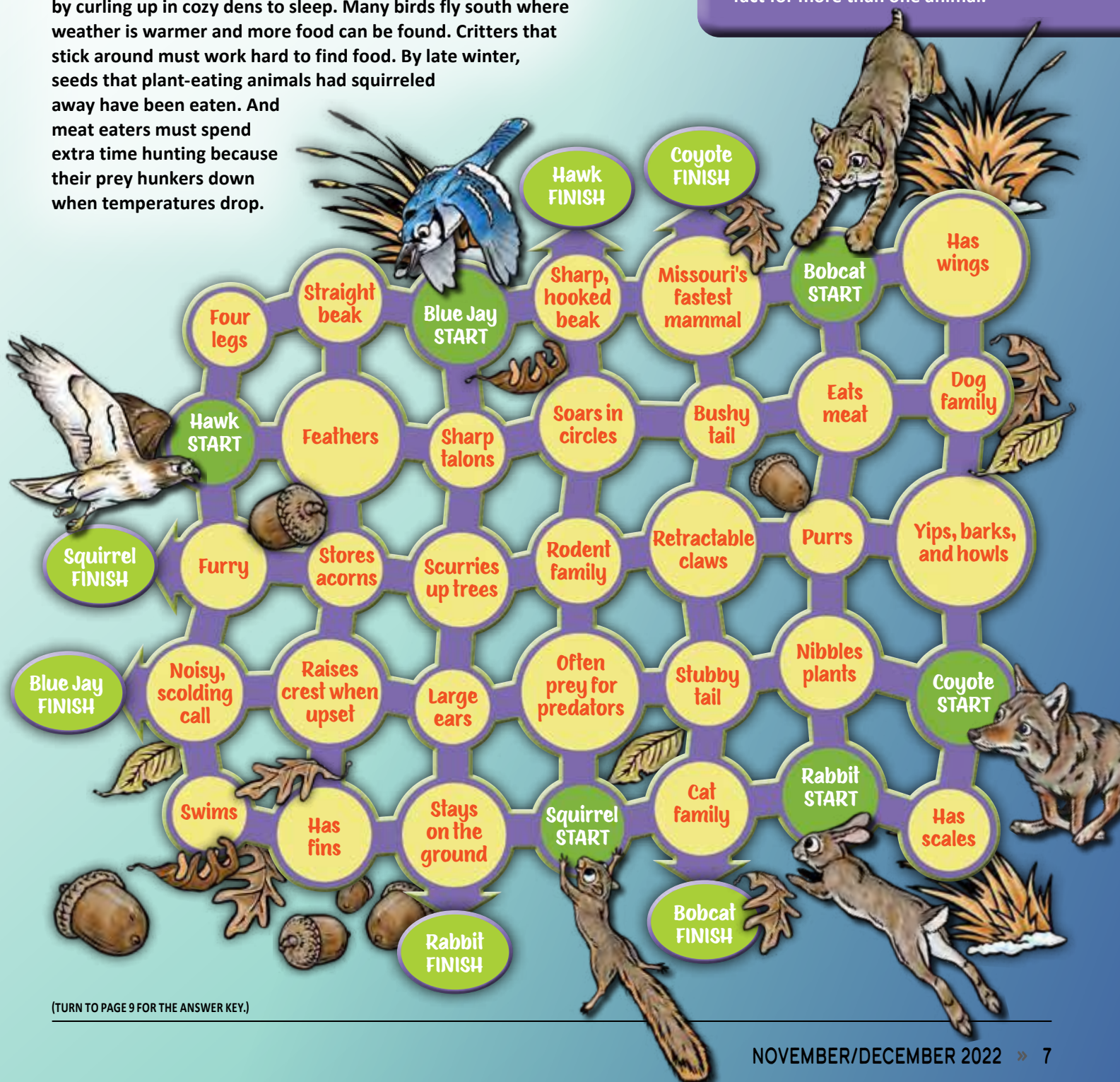
Winter is tough on wild animals. Some mammals cope with cold by curling up in cozy dens to sleep. Many birds fly south where weather is warmer and more food can be found. Critters that stick around must work hard to find food. By late winter, seeds that plant-eating animals had squirreled away have been eaten. And meat eaters must spend extra time hunting because their prey hunkers down when temperatures drop.

## How to PLAY

These hungry animals are hunting for food. Can you figure out where they have been?

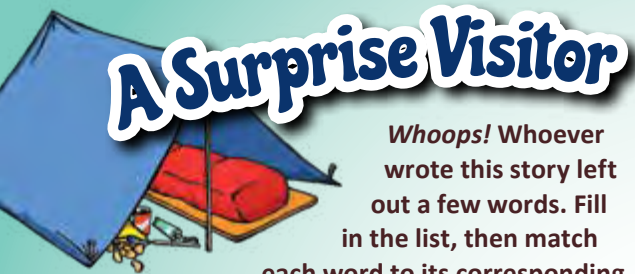
Draw a line from each critter's start to its finish using only the spaces that contain facts about the animal.

**Hint:** You can use the same fact for more than one animal.



(TURN TO PAGE 9 FOR THE ANSWER KEY.)





# A Surprise Visitor

Whoops! Whoever wrote this story left out a few words. Fill in the list, then match each word to its corresponding

number in the story. Some words in the list will be used more than once in the story.

1. PLACE \_\_\_\_\_
2. PERSON'S FIRST NAME \_\_\_\_\_
3. FOOD (PLURAL) \_\_\_\_\_
4. BODY PART \_\_\_\_\_
5. NUMBER (FROM 1 TO 12) \_\_\_\_\_
6. EMOTION \_\_\_\_\_
7. ANIMAL \_\_\_\_\_
8. ANIMAL \_\_\_\_\_
9. BODY PART \_\_\_\_\_
10. VERB ENDING IN -ING \_\_\_\_\_
11. FAMILY MEMBER \_\_\_\_\_
12. FOOD \_\_\_\_\_
13. ANIMAL \_\_\_\_\_
14. ADVERB ENDING IN -ILY \_\_\_\_\_
15. EXCLAMATION \_\_\_\_\_
16. VERB ENDING IN -ED \_\_\_\_\_

Once, while winter camping at (1) \_\_\_\_\_, my buddy (2) \_\_\_\_\_ fell asleep with a box of (3) \_\_\_\_\_ balanced on their (4) \_\_\_\_\_. I knew having food in the tent was a no-no, but I was too tired to put it in the bear canister.

At (5) \_\_\_\_\_ a.m., I awoke with a start. Beside me, (2) \_\_\_\_\_ snored like a (6) \_\_\_\_\_ (7) \_\_\_\_\_. The inside of the tent was as dark as a (8) \_\_\_\_\_'s (9) \_\_\_\_\_. Just as I was (10) \_\_\_\_\_ back to sleep, I heard something. The noise reminded me of the time I caught my (11) \_\_\_\_\_ nibbling (12) \_\_\_\_\_ swiped from my secret stash.

I flicked on my flashlight. Frozen in the beam, sitting atop (2) \_\_\_\_\_'s chest, was a (13) \_\_\_\_\_, (14) \_\_\_\_\_ munching (3) \_\_\_\_\_.

"(15) \_\_\_\_\_!" I yelled, and the (13) \_\_\_\_\_ (16) \_\_\_\_\_ away.

And how did my buddy react? (2) \_\_\_\_\_ slept through the whole thing!

# Choosy Chipmunk

This chipmunk is a picky eater! It only eats acorns that have:

• **A stem** • **A cap** • **No holes**

How many acorns can you find that satisfy all three of these requirements?





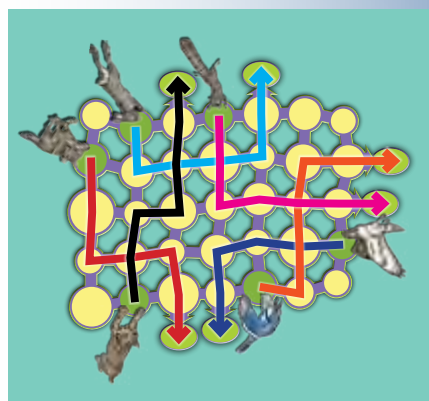
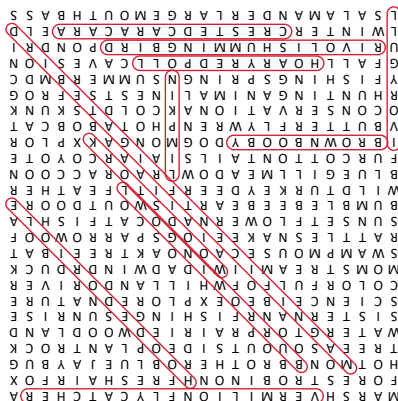
WHY DID THE DEER  
NEED BRACES?

To fix his buck teeth.



WHAT'S MORE AMAZING  
THAN A TALKING BUTTERFLY?

A spelling bee.



# Stocking Switcheroo

Forget sugar plums, these predators have visions of prey dancing in their dreams. But someone stuffed the stockings out of order. Can you match each catnapping carnivore to its favorite stocking?

## Hint:

Some of these animals would be happy with more than one stocking, but there's only one way to match the stockings so that every animal is happy.



Bobcat River otter Bullfrog Speckled kingsnake Great horned owl





# RED FOX

## BUILT-IN BLANKET

A long, bushy tail helps a fox balance during mouse pounces and acts like a blanket on chilly nights.

## SUPERHERO HEARING

A fox's oversized ears can hear a rodent rustling from 100 feet away.

## LETHAL LEAP

*Sproing!* A fox can leap the length of a living room and pounce with pinpoint accuracy.







### RODENT RADAR

Over a dozen muscles attach to a fox's ear canals. They help "tune in" to a rodent's squeaks and scurries.

### COMPASS CAPTURE

Foxes can likely see Earth's magnetic field. This may help them estimate how far away prey is.

### HAIR SNARE

Even when it can't see squat, a fox's sensitive whiskers feel rodents nearby.



# SHOW-ME

# UFOs



**M**issouri is often visited by UFOs — just not the kind filled with little green aliens.

UFOs are spotted every year in the Show-Me State. But these “uncommon flying objects” aren’t silver space saucers. They’re birds.

You see, every animal has a certain area of the world in which it prefers to live. Birds are no exception. For example, many kinds of penguins live only in Antarctica. Unlike penguins, however, most birds can fly. And this means they can turn up hundreds, sometimes *thousands*, of miles away from where they’re normally found.

Here are a few of the most recent uncommon flying objects that have wandered far from home and ended up in the Show-Me State.



## LIMPKIN

In all the years — decade after decade — birdwatchers have been keeping records, no one had ever spotted a limpkin in Missouri.

Which made sense. The brown, long-legged waders love to eat apple snails. And the closest place apple snails are found is Florida. But in 2022, limpkins were spotted in nearly a dozen places across the Show-Me State. One even made an appearance in the middle of St. Louis! It was spotted in September, wading around the pools of the Missouri Botanical Garden.



## FAR-OUT FACT

A limpkin’s bill is curved downward and the tip bends slightly to the right. This twisty-turvy schnoz helps the bird pluck snails out of their shells.





## IVORY GULL

Ivory gulls usually keep company with icebergs and polar bears high in the Arctic. But in January 2015, one went *waaaaay* off course, and it was spotted for the first time in Missouri, hanging out near the Mississippi River north of Hannibal. The ice-loving *brrrds* leave their Arctic homes so rarely, birdwatchers from as far away as Florida, New England, and Texas flocked here for a chance to see this once-in-a-lifetime visitor.



### FAR-OUT FACT

No bird has ever been reported at the North Pole, but ivory gulls have been seen only 130 miles away. That's about half the distance from Kansas City to St. Louis.



## BROWN BOOBY

Crazy things get posted on social media every day. So in 2020, when someone claimed on Facebook to have spotted a brown booby on the Current River, birdwatchers wondered if they were being tricked. Brown boobies, you see, nest on tropical islands and spend most of their lives far out at sea. The fish-gobbling birds had never been seen in Missouri. But the claim turned out to be true, and since then, another booby has been spotted, this time at the Lake of the Ozarks.



### FAR-OUT FACT

Brown boobies often hunt near moving boats, hoping to snap up flying fish and other seafood stirred up by the boat's passage.





## RIVOLI'S HUMMINGBIRD

With emerald-colored throats and purple-colored crowns, Rivoli's hummingbirds shimmer like flying gemstones. The large, long-beaked hummers typically hang out in the mountains of Mexico. In the U.S., they're found in only the extreme southern edges of Arizona and New Mexico. But in June 2020, one wayward hummer took an extended road trip to Missouri and was spotted near a house south of Springfield. It's the only Rivoli's hummingbird ever recorded in the Show-Me State.

### FAR-OUT FACT

Rivoli's hummingbirds have a hard-working heart! It beats up to 1,200 times a minute, one of the highest heart rates ever recorded for an animal.



## HOODED ORIOLE

A female hooded oriole uses her sharp beak to poke holes in palm leaves from below. Then she pushes grasses and plant fibers up through the holes and stitches them to the leaf. Last, she weaves the fibers into a hanging nest for her eggs and babies. It's an amazing process, but you can't see it in Missouri. Hooded orioles nest in Mexico, California, and southwestern states. Only one of the sunshine-colored birds has ever strayed into the Show-Me State. It was seen in 2015 at a house in Columbia.



### FAR-OUT FACT

Hooded orioles in Texas and eastern Mexico are flame-orange. Those living in California and western Mexico are sunshine-yellow.





## BURROWING OWL

If you've read *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen, you know about burrowing owls. (And if you haven't read the book, you should!) The sand-colored, long-legged, day-hunting owls nest in underground burrows. In the U.S., they're typically found in western states (where they live in prairie dog holes) and Florida (where they live in burrows dug by tortoises). Ever so often, one of the little owls shows up in the Show-Me State. The most recent sighting was in March at Shawnee Trail Conservation Area north of Joplin.

### FAR-OUT FACT

Burrowing owls lay out a weird welcome mat. Before nesting, they carpet the entrance to their tunnel with animal poop. This attracts dung beetles, which the owls eat.



## VERMILION FLYCATCHER

A vermilion flycatcher spends its day sitting on a fence post, watching for insects. When an unlucky bug buzzes by, the flycatcher flutters off its perch to nab a snack. They nest in grasslands, shrubby areas, and deserts of southwestern states like Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The flame-colored flyers sparked interest among Missouri's birdwatchers when not one but *three* turned up in the state in 2019. Others have been seen since then, most recently in 2021 near New Madrid.



### FAR-OUT FACT

The vermilion flycatcher's scientific name, *Pyrocephalus rubinus*, literally means "red fire-head."





## CRESTED CARACARA

Often called “Mexican eagles,” crested caracaras aren’t common north of the border. In the U.S., they’re mostly seen in Texas. Though they look like hawks (or eagles), they’re more closely related to falcons, like peregrines and kestrels. And they share their favorite food — carrion (already dead animals) — with vultures. This mixed-up bird has been seen in Missouri only twice. The most recent sighting was in 2017 along the Mississippi River in the Bootheel.



### FAR-OUT FACT

Despite their hefty beaks, crested caracaras aren’t able to peck open thick-skinned animals. They have to wait for vultures or larger animals to open up their meals.



## HOARY REDPOLL

Hoary redpolls are related to purple finches. But hoary redpolls live on the northern tundra and brave winter weather that would turn a purple finch blue. Redpolls are so well-insulated that when a rare warm spell hits the Arctic, they pluck out their fluffiest feathers to avoid overheating. They’ve been seen in Missouri only three times. The last sighting was in 2015 at a house east of Kirksville.



### FAR-OUT FACT

Similar to how a chipmunk packs its cheeks with nuts, a redpoll can fill its guts with seeds. When it’s in a safe spot, it spits up the seeds and cracks them open to eat.





## MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD

If you've been to the beach, you may have noticed a dark, pterodactyl-like bird soaring high above the sand. Magnificent frigatebirds are pirates of the bird world. They patrol the coasts, swooping down to steal food from other birds in midair. In 2020, an unlucky frigatebird got swept north by Hurricane Laura and was spotted in Missouri near St. Charles. As far as anyone knows, only two of these sky pirates have been seen in the Show-Me State.



### FAR-OUT FACT

Frigatebirds sometimes harass other birds until they throw up. The frigatebird then catches and eats the barfed-up seafood. Nothing sounds magnificent about that!



## WOOD STORK

Wood storks don't deliver babies, but they do bring joy to any birdwatcher lucky enough to spot one. Your best chance to see these bald-headed, long-legged wading birds is to visit a swamp in Florida, Georgia, or South Carolina. Even though Missouri's Bootheel has its share of swamps, wood storks have been seen in the state only about 10 times. The latest sighting was in 2021 at Four Rivers Conservation Area near Nevada.



### FAR-OUT FACT

To keep their babies cool in the steamy subtropical heat, stork parents drink water and then throw it up on the heads of the nestlings.



# XPLOR MORE

# PREDATOR PUZZLE

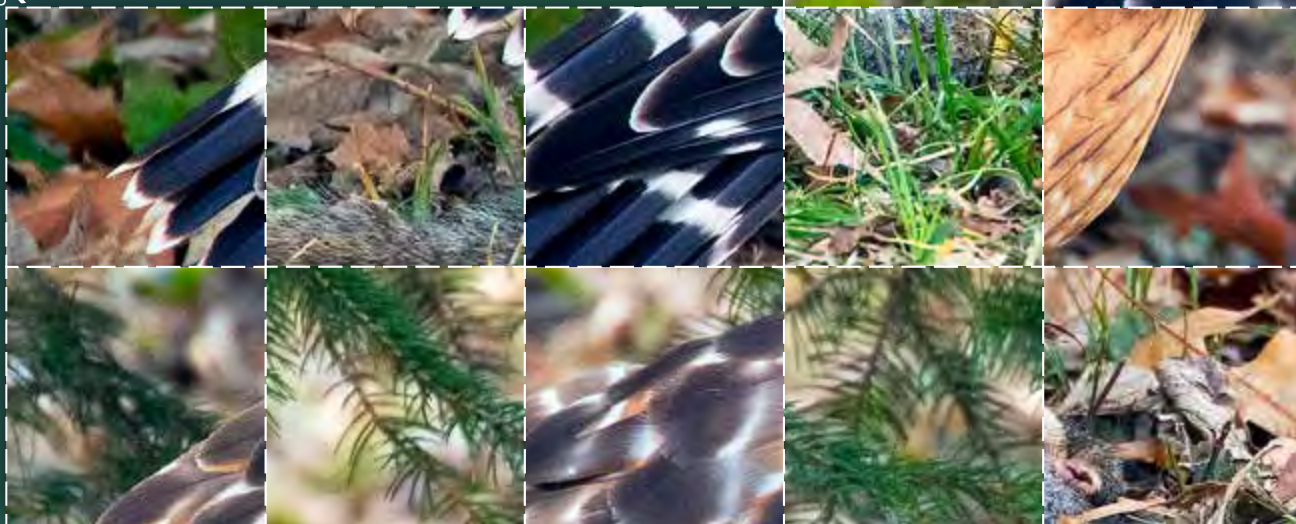
*Eastern gray squirrel*

IN NATURE,  
DIFFERENT BEASTS EAT  
DIFFERENT FEASTS.

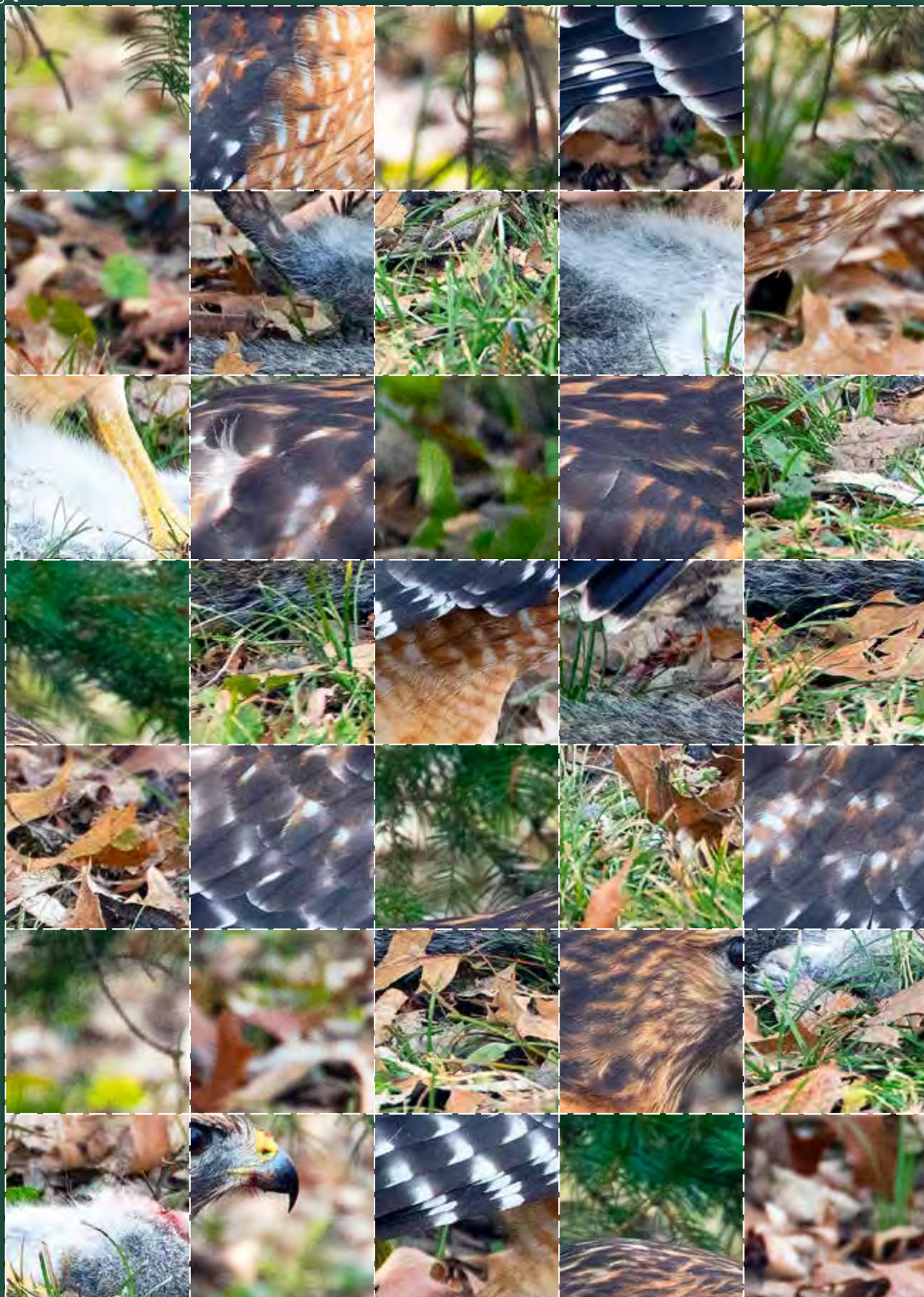
Herbivores, like rabbits and deer, eat mostly plants. Omnivores, like raccoons and people, eat both plants and animals. And carnivores, like bobcats and owls, eat mostly animals.

## WHO'S HAVING SQUIRREL FOR SUPPER?

Cut out the puzzle pieces along the dotted lines and arrange them in the right order to find out.











# GET OUT!


FUN THINGS TO DO  
AND GREAT PLACES  
TO DISCOVER NATURE




**BUSH HONEYSUCKLE** is an invasive shrub that crowds out critter-friendly plants. It stays green after other plants turn brown, which makes fall a perfect time to find and remove it. For tips, visit [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZCi](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZCi).




**HANGING UP A SUET FEEDER** will keep woodpeckers, chickadees, and nuthatches happy and flappy all winter long. For an easy suet recipe, flock to [short.mdc.mo.gov/4pW](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/4pW).



There's no better way to see autumn in all its glory than from the seat of a canoe as you **FLOAT DOWN AN OZARK STREAM**. For river maps, paddle over to [missouricanoe.org](http://missouricanoe.org).



Ever wonder if **DUCK HUNTING** is all it's *quacked* up to be? December is a great time to ask an experienced hunter to take you under their wing. For season dates, places to hunt, and rules to follow, visit [short.mdc.mo.gov/ZQg](http://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZQg).



The longest night of the year, December 21, is a great time to **TAKE A NIGHT HIKE**. You'll hear coyotes howling, owls hooting, and all kinds of night-shift critters raising a ruckus.



WHAT  
IS  
IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



## ALLIGATOR GAR

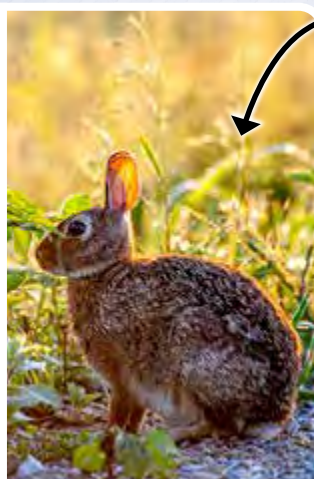
Alligator gar are one of the largest freshwater fishes in North America. They can reach over 8 feet long and weigh more than 300 pounds. Their alligator-like snouts are packed with a double row of spiky teeth, and armor-like scales cover their bodies. They live in the slow-moving backwaters of large rivers and swamps. When oxygen in the water grows scarce, gator gar gulp air at the surface to survive.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside.  
How many of the things on the card can you find?

## EASTERN COTTONTAIL



### FREEZE!

To avoid being seen, cottontails freeze in place. To escape, they zigzag away with long and short hops.

### HELP!

Cottontails usually keep quiet. But when captured by a predator, they let out a *hare-raising* squeal.

### EAR MUFFS

Heat escapes quickly from a rabbit's ginormous ears. To stay warmer, cottontails press their ears flat against their bodies.

### WHOSE SCAT IS THAT?

Cottontails leave behind round, pea-sized droppings. Finding them is a good sign a rabbit is nearby.

### YOU EAT WHAT?

Rabbits eat their own droppings. Digesting "food" twice helps bunnies absorb extra nutrients.



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[mdc.mo.gov/xplor](http://mdc.mo.gov/xplor).

FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

## GO FIND IT!

Cottontails are found statewide but don't stray far from thickets or weedy cover. For more on Missouri's most common rabbit, hop over to [mdc.mo.gov/field-guide](http://mdc.mo.gov/field-guide).

EASTERN COTTONTAIL

